

Episodic Memory, Emotional Priming, and Lexical Access in Heritage & L2 Learners

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Heritage speakers and second-language (L2) learners often demonstrate similar language proficiency while relying on different learning experiences and memory systems. Heritage speakers typically acquire language through early exposure within family and community contexts, whereas L2 learners often develop language skills through formal instruction and deliberate study. Previous research suggests that heritage speakers possess strong implicit linguistic knowledge despite lower confidence in their abilities, while L2 learners rely more heavily on explicit processing strategies and conscious lexical monitoring [1,2]. This study explores whether emotional priming enhances lexical access differently for low-confidence Spanish heritage speakers and highly motivated Spanish L2 learners.

Participants would complete questionnaires measuring language exposure, confidence, and proficiency before being assigned to either an emotionally expressive or emotionally neutral Spanish-language priming condition. Following the priming phase, participants would complete an eye-tracking lexical decision task designed to measure fixation patterns, lexical competition, response accuracy, and processing speed. Measures would include time to first fixation on target words, attention to competing lexical items, and overall task accuracy.

It is predicted that heritage speakers will demonstrate higher overall lexical accuracy due to stronger implicit language representations developed through early exposure. Emotional priming is expected to improve lexical access more substantially for heritage speakers by activating autobiographical and emotionally encoded linguistic memories. In contrast, L2 learners may benefit less from emotional priming because their language knowledge is more strongly supported by explicit learning strategies.

This research contributes to psycholinguistics, language acquisition, and sociolinguistics by examining how memory, emotion, and identity influence real-time language processing. Findings may help inform educational practices for heritage language learners while advancing our understanding of the relationship between autobiographical experience and lexical access.

References: [1] Broersma (2012). [2] Chaouch-Orozco et al. (2023). [3] Joseph et al. (2020). [4] Kaan & Chun (2018). [5] Gonzalez-Franco & Lanier (2017).